

AGORDON'S PRIDE

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

Ethel was undecided as to how to meet Sir Oscar. It was useless to send excuses or make delays—the task must be accomplished. She thought of going down to breakfast, and then walking out with him; but when she rose from her seat to make the necessary change in her dress, her limbs trembled so that she could not stand. She could not go down to breakfast and talk and laugh with those around her—she, with her strength all gone. She decided at last to write a note to him. It said simply:

"Dear Sir Oscar, I do not feel well enough to go down to breakfast to-day. Will you meet me in an hour's time by the lakeside? I have something very important to say to you."

The maid to whom she intrusted the note smiled with delight. She had guessed the depth of despair in the heart of the hapless girl who had written it. Sir Oscar did not smile as he read it. He knew Ethel so well—he understood her pride, her delicate reserve, her modesty, her graceful reticence so well—that to him the little note seemed to say, "The something" she had to say puzzled him—he would not even think that she was about to reject him.

"I am sure she likes me," he said to himself. "She is so proud that if she did not love me, she would never have allowed me to kiss her hand—she would have dismissed me with a word. It must be some shy, girlish idea."

Lady St. Norman did not feel in the least degree surprised about Ethel's absence from the breakfast table.

"She likes to keep her lever in suspense," Lady St. Norman told her husband; and he laughed at the idea.

"When a proud girl like Ethel does give up her liberty," he said, "I suppose she is happy when she is free."

He never dreamed that the shadow which had so long darkened his daughter's life was to become a perpetual gloom. Sir Oscar went to his appointment; he was impatient to know what Ethel had to say to him. He saw her in the distance, sitting under the shade of the large cedar tree, and his heart beat as he drew near her. His hope faded when she raised her colorless face to his.

"My dearest Ethel," he said, "I have hastened to obey your wish. I hope you have good news for me—you have been thinking of what I have said, and you will promise to be my wife?"

He sat down by her side; he saw on her face a look of long and painful struggle, and he wondered silently what she was about to say.

"If there was any prayer I could urge that I have not urged already," he said, "I would urge it, Ethel. I left my life and my love as you have it, and I will give me something in return for them?"

"I sent for you, Sir Oscar," returned Ethel, "to tell you that I am grateful for your love—for your kindness—but that I can never be your wife."

Her voice was so low that he hardly recognized it, and the music seemed to have died out of it.

"My dearest Ethel, that is a neat little speech—one that you have evidently learned by heart; but I refuse for one moment to believe that you mean to say that you intend to be so cruel to me; you could not."

"I am sorry," she faltered, "but indeed it is true, I cannot marry you, Sir Oscar." Still he did not believe it; it was shyness, it was coyness, it was a desire to tease him—it could not be true. He knew before her one who stood humbly for the favor of a queen; he took the white cold hands in his and looked up into the exquisite face.

"You cannot mean it, Ethel. See, dearest, I kneel to you. Do not do me away from you. You do not know how dearly I love you. If you were to tell me to die for you, I would do so with a smile on my lips; but I cannot leave you, Ethel. There are some things beyond a man's strength; that is beyond mine. Let me come if it needs must, but not life without you!"

"I cannot marry you, Sir Oscar," she repeated—and something in the wistful anguish of her face told him the words were true.

"Ethel," he said, "do you love me?" She raised her beautiful eyes slowly to his, and in their shadowed depths he read nothing but despair.

"Yes," she replied, "I love you. I might say, 'No,' I might speak falsely, I might make some mistake; but I know that I would be useless, quite useless. I love you, Sir Oscar, but I can never be your wife."

His face flushed as he listened to her; the hapless expression of her face, the dreary sound of her voice filled him with dismay.

"Ethel," he said, gently, "will you answer me one question? When a man has to die, he may ask for a reason. Tell me—do you love any one else?"

"No," she replied, sadly, "I do not."

"Have you ever loved any one else?" "No," she answered, earnestly, "never in all my life."

"Yet you cannot marry me! Oh, Ethel, you are saying it to try me! You cannot be in earnest, my beautiful love!"

"It is true, Sir Oscar, that I do not love you alone of all the world. I shall never love any one else, let me live as long as I may."

He looked thoughtfully at her.

"Ethel, you know that Lord St. Norman is not favorable to our marriage, but he is desirous of it."

"I know that," she said.

Her voice died away, and a deep, bitter sob came from her lips.

"Ethel, my darling, if you would but trust me!" he cried.

"To trust you, but I cannot tell you my secret. I can never be your wife, Sir Oscar. The gulf between us is one that nothing can bridge over. It is deeper and darker than death."

"Then, Ethel," he demanded, in a voice full of anguish, "do you mean that I, with my heart and soul full of love for you—with my whole life depending on you—do you mean that I am to go away from you, and never see you again?"

"The passion in his voice startled her. She laid her white hand on his.

"I mean it, dear," she said, gently; "it must be so—it cannot be helped."

"Not even if it breaks my heart, Ethel?"

"Not if it breaks your heart, and mine," she answered; "we must part, and it will be unwise for us ever to meet again."

He buried his face in the soft silken folds of her dress, and a silence that was full of pain fell over them. When he raised his face again it was colorless as her own, with the same pain round his eyes.

"How cruel women are!" he cried.

"The fairest among them are more cruel than the boy who cages a bird and then tortures it to death. Ethel, you know that I loved you, and you took my heart in your hands only to break it. Oh, cruel—cruel as cold!"

"Nay, Oscar," she interrupted. "I stand on the threshold of a parting that will be to both of us more bitter than death; believe me, on my word, I did not think of you, did not know you loved me, I did not know that I loved you. I thought that we were only dear, true friends. I never meant to love any one—the knowledge came on me as a shock or a terrible surprise; but it came so late. You believe me, Oscar, do you not?"

"My poor child, my poor Ethel, forgive me if I seemed to upbraid you. Darling, I would rather love you, and love you in vain than win the greatest affection from any one else. But, Ethel, this secret of yours—does Lord St. Norman know it?"

"She looked at him, her sweet face white with terror."

"No," she replied quickly; "and you must not lead him to suppose that there is one, Oscar. He will think I am proud and cold of heart; he must think so—better anything than that he should suspect the truth."

"I wish you would trust me," he said.

"This is not the age of mystery or romance; what secret can a fair young life like yours hold, Ethel, which should prevent your being happy?"

"My dear Oscar, I buried her face in her hands, weeping loudly, and crying that it was all her fault—all her fault—and that she was most bitterly punished for her sin."

Ethel was the first to recover herself. Sir Oscar was like one stunned by a sudden blow. Ethel's words were so unexpected that for a time they had unmanned him. She laid her hand on his, and looked at him.

"Heaven knows," she said, "that I would have borne anything rather than have inflicted this pain upon you. I did not mean it. Will you forgive me? The only pleasant memory I can carry with me through life is that you have forgiven me."

"I have nothing to forgive," she returned, gently.

"I have told you, Ethel, that I would rather be unhappy with your love than happy with the truest affection of another. You will send me from you, then, Ethel?"

"Yes, Oscar, do you mean?"

"I must, there is no alternative. I send you to me in time, that I may meet you in eternity. I might have deceived you, and done wrong; but then there would have been no heaven for me. I shall bear the pain of my life as bravely as I can."

"You are so good, Ethel," he moaned. "I am sure you have done no wrong." And then he looked at her white face. "What am I to do, Ethel? How am I to bear my life?"

"She thought of his own words in India, and she could not repeat them."

"I must bear it, too," he continued; "but it is the heaviest sorrow that ever man had to bear. Ethel, do you mean that I am to go back to Lord St. Norman, tell him that I have failed, and then go away without a word of explanation? Do you mean that?"

"There is no hope," she replied; "and I shall be grateful to you if you will tell my father. He will be angry and disappointed, but it cannot be helped."

"I will do that, or anything else for you. And this is the last time I shall see you. I will send for you, beautiful face and hold your hand in mine—the last time I am to whisper words to you?"

"Yes, it is the last time," she answered.

"Ethel," he said, suddenly; "make me one promise that if ever you want help you will send for me. I will not ask again what your secret is—if you could you would tell me. But, if ever there comes a time when I can help you—when a strong right arm, an earnest will, a devoted heart may be of service to you—you will send for me."

"I will," she said.

herself; "if Heaven would take pity on me, and send me eternal rest!"

How could she go back through the sunlight to the house? How could she meet people, talk to them, smile on them? How could she play her part in the daily round of life while her heart was aching with terrible pain? If she could but sit there in silence until death came and took her from her sorrow!

She could not find relief in tears, as some would have done; her grief lay too deep for that. She had said good-by to him for only love; there was nothing now but patient endurance. Life could give her no greater pleasure, and she did not more joy; it was all over—all ended.

As she sat there in the glow of sunshine, her short sad life passed in review before her—the happy, careless days, when her graceful, fantastic, imperious rule at Fontaineau had been the whole world to her; and her own heart with delight; the days when she had rejoiced in her father's love, happy and bright as the birds and the butterflies, desiring nothing beyond it; the darker times, when pride, anger, and revenge had possessed her—her—like a storm of floating fancy that had ended so terribly and so tragically.

"There is no excuse for this," she moaned—"no excuse; but was ever human being more hardy punished for their sin?"

What great, unutterable happiness had been offered her, which she had been compelled to put aside! She might have been the happiest woman living. She might have been Sir Oscar's wife. All the love, the joy, the happiness that life holds might have been hers, but she had been obliged to put it from her and think of no more. She raised her white, despairing face to the smiling heavens.

"I have deserved it all," she said; "but I am hardly punished for my sin."

It was noon before she left the shade of the cedar tree and returned to the house. Lady St. Norman saw her walking across the lawn, and she wondered why she walked so slowly and so sadly. She looked at her face—it was colorless, with lines of pain all around the sweet, trembling lips. Lady St. Norman watched her for some time in silence.

"Ethel is ill," she said to herself; and she went out to meet her.

She said no word when she came near her—there was something in Ethel's face which forbade her to increase her grief by her room with her, and closed the door. Then, with open arms, she turned to her step-daughter.

"Ethel," she said, gently, "what is it? And Ethel, sleeping her white arms round the kindly neck, hid her face on Helen's breast."

"What is it, my dear?" asked Lady St. Norman. She felt Ethel shivering like one extremely cold.

"Helen," said the faint, broken voice "you were always good to me, but now I am kind to me, and the world is kind to me and the world."

"I will," promised Lady St. Norman; "tell me one thing, Ethel. Have you refused Sir Oscar?"

"Yes," she answered; "I have refused him, and he is gone."

And then, without another word, Lady St. Norman laid Ethel down upon her bed.

"Try to sleep, my dear," she said; "your face is flushed, and your eyes burn. Would it relieve you—would it like I thought, why you have refused Sir Oscar? I thought you loved him."

The girl turned from her with a weary sigh.

"Do not ask me to do so, Helen. You have been kind to me, but the greatest kindness you can do from this time forth will be never to mention his name again," and Ethel turned from the kindly face bent over her—turned from the sunlight and closed her eyes, like one tired of life.

Lady St. Norman was considerate. She saw that Ethel was harassed by some secret sorrow, and though she was both surprised and puzzled, she did not comment upon it. With a grave, anxious look on her face, she went to her room, and there she found him alone, and certainly, from the expression of his countenance, looking not well pleased.

"Helen," he said, "I cannot understand this. Ethel has refused Sir Oscar, and he has gone away. I thought she liked him. How difficult is it to know one's own heart! I cannot tell you how annoyed I am."

It was the mission of this fair gentleman to be a peace-maker. With a gentle caressing touch she laid her hand on her husband's shoulder.

"I know," she said; "I am very sorry; but I want to speak to you about Ethel. Do not be angry with her—she is not happy."

"She is never likely to be," asserted his lordship, angrily. "I wonder whom she would go to next. I am sure she had better ask me."

"Do you know what my idea is, Leonard?"

"No," he replied, softened by the sweetness of his wife's voice and the grace of her manner. "It is a sensible idea I am sure!"

"I have told you, Leonard, that I am not happy; and I think that must be the cause. Do not say anything to her, Leonard. Leave her to me."

He did not like the idea of his beautiful Ethel being unhappy.

"I shall not say anything to her, Helen," he said. "You must manage her as you can. You understand her better than I do. And when, after the lapse of a few days, Lord St. Norman says to her, 'Ethel, she said no word to her of Sir Oscar's refusal when he heard that Sir Oscar Charlotte had left England did he tell her about it.'"

CHAPTER XXXIX.

Ten years had passed since the fatal summer morning when Ethel Gordon had gone out to her fate—ten long years—and during that time she had lived a life which would have been a life of honor and glory had she heard one word of her from Laurie Carrington. She did not know whether he was alive or dead; all she did know was that she was bound for life in chains, the weight of which grew heavier day by day. She did not know how long she had been there, but she was sure that she was not there because he was, nor what he was doing. He had duped her more cruelly than ever woman had been duped before. She detested his name, she loathed his memory; but so cruel that detestation and loathing could not extinguish the true, passionate love he had borne her, and it softened her heart in some slight degree. She never expected to hear of him again. It was ten years since that fatal morning. He might be living, or he might be dead; she should not know, but her life would be passed in suspense. She was not afraid of his finding her. "If he had wanted to find me," she said to herself, "he would have managed it before now. He always was a clever man."

It was eight years since the summer morning when she said farewell to her lover.

During all that time she had never heard from him. His name was occasionally mentioned in society, and strangers stated that he had gone to Africa. She heard of his travelling in Egypt and the Holy Land. She also heard people wondering why he did not return to England and settle at home. But from himself she had no news.

Ten years had gradually changed Ethel. She was a graceful, lovely girl when she went to her fate; but now she was a woman in the pride of her magnificent womanhood. Sorrow had done for her what nothing else could have done—it had refined and increased her beauty; the glories of youth were no longer bright with happy laughter, but her eyes were now like stars, and her face had a certain look that made one look at them

again and again. The exquisite face had never regained its daily bloom, but more beauty it was given to her—her sweet lips, the tender, thoughtful eyes, were more lovely than ever. The graceful figure had reached its full perfection; there was a queenly dignity about Ethel, a sweet, tender gravity that could only come from some great sorrow, and she wore her sorrow like a diadem.

She had suffered long and keenly after Sir Oscar went away, and then she learned more than ever to value Lady St. Norman's love and goodness. Helen shielded her from the world; she saw that the girl's heart was bruised and she did her best to comfort her. She stood between her and all impertinent comment, all curious questions, and she found the place unusually stirring; business is thrown aside, and the great moment of the place (wine) rests for this day at least in peace, and little obtains of attention save particular of the anticipated arrival of the French fleet.

The morning sunlight, flinging fire on every one of its tints and shades of pearly gray and delicate purple, settles down into the deep, concentrated, unwinking glare of a Spanish autumn day, bringing out the bold dark shadows of the broad orange tree leaves, and dropping the slender pomegranate foliage where the ruby-hearted fruit no longer lingers. Down on the white walls and dusty streets of the Andalusian town of Jerez-de-Francia falls the steady sunbeam, and finds the place unusually stirring; business is thrown aside, and the great moment of the place (wine) rests for this day at least in peace, and little obtains of attention save particular of the anticipated arrival of the French fleet.

For some years she had declined going to London during the season, and, finding that the idea of it only gave her pain, Lord St. Norman ceased to mention it. It became a settled thing that when Lord and Lady St. Norman went to town, she should remain at Norman's Keep. She so constantly refused all invitations, that after a time people ceased to invite her. She was obliged to meet the society that her father had chosen for her, but it soon became an understanding thing that Miss St. Norman "never went anywhere."

Of course people talked; who that remembered her during her first brilliant season in London were astonished that she had ever given up to increase her solitude. The great people of the great world regretted the beautiful Miss St. Norman. Those who had been her rivals wondered at her; people asked each other why she, who was so young and so beautiful, should give up the pleasures of the world and had buried herself in the country. For the first year or two many invitations were sent to her, but she refused them all.

"You should try to enjoy life, Ethel," said Lady St. Norman to her one day; and when she looked at her with sad, sweet eyes, said, simply:

"What people call life, ended for me long ago, Helen."

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HORSE RACING IN SPAIN.

Curious sights and sounds at an Andalusian course—sportsmen who interest the strangers as much as the sports—Do-Gay Colors and Strange Music—The Spanish Newmarket.

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